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Chapter 151: The First Fallen Rebel Army

It was only now that Spartacus understood that Crossus had never changed his mind, and knowing him quite well, he quickly guessed the purpose behind Crossus's actions.

Feeling a bit melancholic, Spartacus soon pulled himself together and did not heed Antonix's suggestion to send the cavalry back to locate Crossus's army. Instead, he ordered the troops to gather quickly and march north.

As he left the camp, he paused for a moment to look back and silently wished his old comrade-in-arms Crossus good luck.

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Crossus was unwilling to lead his troops north but that didn't mean he was foolish enough to face the oncoming Roman Army alone.

He devised a plan: first to follow behind Spartacus's main forces to mislead the approaching Roman Army into thinking that all the rebel forces had retreated north. Then, when his army set camp along the route at the foot of the Gallanum Cape, he would take advantage of the night to discreetly lead his troops into the hills of Gallanum Cape...

He believed that the Romans would be attracted to Spartacus's main forces and wouldn't notice his army's disappearance. Once the Romans engaged with Spartacus's troops, he would then lead his troops back south, an undoubtedly more prudent and safe approach.

Gallanum Cape is located in the northeast of the Apulia region, jutting into the Adriatic Sea. On the map, the cape looks like a human thumb sticking out, its interior filled with rising hills and devoid of towns.

Even with a guide leading the way, Crossus's army dared not venture deep into the cape's interior. They struggled to find a somewhat flat valley, where over 30,000 soldiers, with non-combat personnel totaling nearly 40,000, huddled together and hastily set up camp.

Three days passed, and suddenly a messenger reported: "Leader, Romans! The Roman Army is advancing towards us!"

"What!" Crossus was taken aback. He had thought his plan was meticulous enough and his troop movements sufficiently secretive—how could they have been discovered by the Romans?!

He was unaware, however, that Roman Governor Publius had long been watching him, closely monitoring his army's movements. No matter how secretive a force of 40,000 could be, it couldn't completely conceal its tracks.

Since the plan failed, Crossus, after a brief moment of disappointment, brushed it aside: after all, a confrontation with the Romans was inevitable sooner or later, and now that they've come knocking, it was time to take them on!

Crossus immediately gathered his troops, came down from the hills to engage in battle, and deployed on a gentle slope at the foot of Gallanum Cape, positioning his most well-equipped warriors in the front line.

The Roman Army, led by Publius, arrived shortly thereafter, quickly formed their formations, and after a brief rest, initiated the attack.

At first glance, the formations and equipment of both sides appeared similar, and those unaware might think it was the same army conducting an exercise, but in reality, the battle was incredibly fierce.

Half of Crossus's army were Gauls, naturally fierce, and Crossus had painstakingly gathered weapons and armor to equip them, which had offended Enomai, but also greatly enhanced these Gaul warriors' combat power. They became more loyal to Crossus, fearlessly fighting to the death under his leadership.

The other part of the rebel army, though somewhat intimidated by the Roman Legion, found themselves in a desperate situation. If they did not fight, their only fate was death, spurring them to defy the Romans with fierce determination.

Publius led a force of 50,000, largely outnumbering the opposition. However, not all were Roman Legion; he departed Rome with only 4 legions, totaling over 24,000 soldiers. Along the way, he exercised

his gubernatorial rights, recruiting City Guards from various towns and equipping them with the Roman Legion's weapons and armor, forming a grand army that indeed intimidated the rebel forces. Nonetheless, actual combat effectiveness varied greatly; while the Roman Legion soldiers showed significant improvement after strict training for over half a year, the Citizen Soldiers from towns were notably less effective. Hence, Publius used the Roman Legion as the mainstay and vanguard, while other units served as reserves.

The rebel army held the advantageous terrain and fought valiantly. Despite their inferior weapons and equipment, they gradually gained an upper hand in the battle.

Publius had to continuously dispatch his large reserves, either to bolster the formation's thickness to prevent breakthroughs or to intensify attacks on the rebel army's flanks, thus weakening their frontal assaults...

The battle lasted a long time, and just when both sides' soldiers were growing weary, an Eagle Banner suddenly appeared on the hill behind the rebel army's formation...

After locating where Crossus's army was concealed, Publius had waited until the fourth day to launch his attack because he needed to make some preparations: he sent out one of the most elite legion battalions along the coast of Gallanum Cape to the easternmost seaside town of Merinum, and then, enduring great hardship, traversed mountains and ridges to stealthily arrive at the rear of the rebel army...

The hills inland Gallanum Cape sprawled endlessly, with few visitors aside from shepherds herding sheep. The rebel soldiers never anticipated that at such a crucial moment, Roman reinforcements would appear at their rear.

This rested Roman battalion launched a ferocious attack from high ground onto the rear of the rebel formation...

In the end, the rebel army was defeated, Crossus fought valiantly to his death, over 20,000 warriors and non-combatants perished, and the remaining routed soldiers fled into the hills...

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Publius sat inside the military tent at the rebel army camp. Outside, the cries of elderly men, screams of women, and sobs of children echoed without pause. He seemed deaf to it all, engrossed in fiddling

with a severed head handed to him by his subordinate. Finally, he spoke: "I've heard that this Cross had an impressive win rate in Capua's gladiatorial arena. Any gladiator who faced him was either killed or gravely injured. Spectators called him the Gaul Evil Wolf. Judging by his ferocious features, it's quite fitting."

"No matter how fierce the brute, before you, my lord, they are mere clay chickens and mangy dogs," his subordinate flattered quickly.

"No, this Cross cannot be underestimated. Even with such poor equipment, they managed to inflict thousands of casualties on us. If I hadn't prepared thoroughly in advance, this battle might've ended quite differently..."

Publilius spoke solemnly to his subordinate, "Take this severed head and immediately return to Rome. Announce this victory to the people, but when reporting to the Senate, be truthful about the grueling nature of this battle. Let them understand these rebels are not so easily vanquished. That way, our triumph will appear all the more hard-earned."

"Understood."

Publilius turned to another subordinate. "If even this Cross was so troublesome, defeating Spartacus' rebel army, who are stronger and more numerous, will surely be an even greater challenge! Head north immediately, find Crodianus, and remind him not to engage this band of rebels alone. Hold the camp firmly until I arrive with reinforcements. Then we'll crush them together."

"Yes, sir!"

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The rebel army's main forces traversed Apulia, entering Fludenti territory—a shift from flat plains into hilly terrain that significantly increased the difficulty of their march.

Although advancing along the coastal roads would be smoother, Spartacus understood that relying entirely on roads deep within enemy territory would be incredibly perilous. Thus, he adopted a different marching strategy from Maximus and the vanguard forces, splitting the main forces into two. The supply

camp and non-combat personnel used the coastal route, while he led the combat troops through the hills.

This inevitably slowed their march considerably. However, with the Roman Army's pursuit still lackluster, Spartacus and the other leaders weren't overly anxious.

The food supply, however, demanded their immediate attention. The main rebel forces were vast in number, and while stationed in camps in the Calabria Region, feeding everyone was already the leaders' most pressing concern—though still manageable. But on the march, the demand for food skyrocketed, and supplying grain became increasingly strained.

Fortunately, it was now May. Though wheat wasn't fully ripe, most had reached the grain-filling stage and could barely be consumed. Flumentani's hilly terrain was crisscrossed with streams and dotted with numerous farmlands. Moreover, the forests provided an abundance of wild vegetables, fruits, and active wildlife. After deliberating with his fellow leaders, Spartacus implemented strict food rationing measures, ensuring minimal consumption of stored supplies. They camped early daily, allowing the warriors to gather provisions locally to satisfy their hunger.

This approach naturally infringed upon Flumentani's interests. Yet, the Flumentani people, perhaps intimidated by the sheer might of the rebel army, refrained from taking hostile actions. As long as the rebels didn't attack their cities, the locals tolerated their fields being harvested and items from houses outside the city being looted...

Meanwhile, Maximus' vanguard forces, advancing along coastal roads, lived relatively comfortably.

Historically, the coastal Flumentani people maintained intricate ties with Adriatic Pirates. In fact, the cliffside town of Ortona was built with Flumentani consent for pirates to inhabit. Their dwellings were pieced together from wrecked ships and scorned as "beast-like abominations" by Romans.

After occupying Sarabia, Maximus' forces developed favorable relations through maritime trade with certain Adriatic pirates, especially Karsipengpas. With their assistance, Maximus negotiated agreements with the Flumentani coastal towns: the rebels wouldn't launch aggressive actions against the towns in return for food and essential supplies for the march and camp life...

Maximus' forces crossed the Atenum River first, entering Umbria.

Umbria barely extends towards the Adriatic coast, with most of its territory inland. Within days, the forces reached Pisenum.

Pisenum, still characterized by hills, was home to various ethnic groups: Pisentini, Vestini, Marsi, Peligni, and Marussini. Though small in number, these groups were undeniably courageous, making Pisenum one of Italy's regions most distant from Rome.

Decades ago, the Roman Alliance War began here, sparked by the Marsi people. Their leader, Pompeius, sought to replace Rome with Copenium, renamed Italica. This demonstrated their ambition and earned the moniker "Marci War." Unfortunately, they ultimately lost, leading to years of Roman oppression. Recent years hadn't been favorable for these people.

The arrival of the rebel army, surging like a flood, evoked behavior from the Pisenum locals similar to the Fluentani's—but with less fear and subtle hints of hope.

Maximus led his forces to Pisenum's southern coastal town, Mateninum, when Cavalry Captain Haguks, responsible for scouting ahead, rushed back.

"Leader, we scouted a Roman Camp near Ascoli Port, stretching westward to Ascoli Piceno. Due to Roman cavalry patrols near the camp, we avoided getting too close and couldn't estimate their numbers."

Haguks didn't appear discouraged. He gestured to a farmer he had brought back. "On my way back, I encountered this man. He claims to know the origins of this Roman force and is willing to join us in the fight against the Romans."

"Oh?" Maximus curiously studied the farmer: a short man in tattered linen clothing, coated in dust—a clear sign of hardship. Yet, his well-defined features radiated a spirit of unyielding defiance.

The farmer slightly lowered his head before declaring loudly, "Greetings! My name is Demolius, a Marsi, nephew of Pompeius!—"

Pompeius... Maximus was stunned, glancing at Quintus by his side. The staff officer had recently recounted this region's Roman history to him, including mention of the name. The young farmer's proud expression clearly showed his admiration for his deceased relative.

"...Due to that war decades ago, Rome has treated the people of Pisenum unjustly. Everyone harbors resentment in their hearts..."

Demolius' face flushed with anger. He took a deep breath, calming his emotions before continuing, "Last year, we heard of your uprising and rejoiced that someone dared to resist the Romans. We've been keeping a close eye on you since. However, the Roman officials, constantly wary of us, tightened their grip on Pisenum towns, preventing us from joining you sooner—"

"When you say 'we,' who are you referring to?" Maximus couldn't help but ask.

"The Pisenum people eager to fight Rome alongside you, including myself!" Demolius straightened his chest, pointing to himself with determination. "Though they are currently tied down, I managed to slip away to meet you."

Chapter 153: Blocked Ahead, Pursued from Behind

Maximus put on an understanding posture, but in fact, he did not fully believe Demolius's words. The people of Pisenum, who had suffered the failure of war and were strictly controlled by the Romans, would have the courage to join a rebel army that had not yet been fully war-tested? And, this was while the Roman Army was already guarding the area!

"Tell me about this Roman army ahead," Maximus prompted.

"A month ago, Governor Crodianus led this army along the Sarabian Way from Rome to Ascoli Piceno, where they set up camp and began constructing military fortifications towards Ascoli Port. I know they are here to deal with you, so I tried every means to find out detailed information about this Roman army."

Demolius said with great confidence, "This Roman army has a total of 50,000 men, but don't worry, only four are true Roman Armies, with over 24,000 soldiers who have undergone strict training for more than half a year. The other more than 20,000 soldiers were city guards recruited from towns in Ladim,

Umbria. However, the Romans equipped them with full Roman Army gear, but they are clearly different from the true Roman Army, so the governor has been hastily training these soldiers..."

Maximus exchanged a few glances with Quintus, then asked indifferently, "That's all?"

"Moreover, Ascoli Piceno itself is a city easy to defend and hard to attack, and the Roman Army has desperately built fortifications there with traps, moats, earth walls, and watchtowers... The defenses are very strict, and if you want to break through, I'm afraid it will be very difficult!"

Demolius solemnly reminded, "I heard that you came here to escape the attack of another governor, Publius, and now there are Romans blocking in front and chasing from behind, so you must think of a way to defeat them quickly, otherwise, they will encircle and wipe you out!"

"Thank you very much for your help!" Maximus expressed his gratitude with a smile, then turned around and said, "Magus, go get 10 or from him."

"Ah?... Okay... okay, leader."

"No, no, I don't want money! I want to join you! I want to fight the Romans!..." Demolius said eagerly.

Maximus saw his excited expression, genuinely emotional, and persuaded, "As you said, we are now in a dangerous situation, and if you join us at this time, you may soon die in battle!"

"Dying in battle is better than living cowardly!" Demolius answered firmly.

"Very well then," Maximus said somewhat helplessly, then he smiled, extended his right hand, and said in a deep voice, "Welcome to join us!"

Demolius excitedly grabbed Maximus's hand.

"Casius, take this brother to see Commander Carmine, say that I said it, and let him become a member of Free Italy." Maximus glanced at his attendant.

Having spent several months around Maximus, the astute Casius immediately understood the unspoken words of the leader: have Carmine keep an eye on this guy to prevent him from being a spy.

"Leader, rest assured, I'll take him to see Commander Carmine right away." Casius winked at Maximus and then politely said to Demolius, "Please come with me."

After the two left, Maximus restrained his smile, looked at Quintus, and said in a deep voice, "You were right, the Romans indeed sent troops to block us in front. Another 50,000! It seems the Romans are trying to encircle and destroy us here!"

Quintus's expression also became somewhat grim, and he said with some regret, "According to Roman tradition, two governors always command separately, and since one troop is pursuing from behind, there must be another troop hidden somewhere else... I should have thought of this earlier!

And these two governors are also playing tricks, their forces are not all strictly trained Roman Armies, so their combat effectiveness should not be too strong. I should have advised you earlier to persuade other leaders to insist on confronting the Roman army in the Tarentum area, maybe we wouldn't be facing today's predicament."

Maximus was somewhat indifferent, comforting, "Even if the Roman army played tricks, with our situation at the time, we didn't have the guts to fight them. What has happened has happened, don't overthink it. Let's focus on solving the current problem."

Pursued from behind and blocked in front, being encircled by a 100,000-strong army made even the seasoned Quintus feel extremely anxious, but the young Maximus showed such calmness that Quintus felt both ashamed and somewhat impressed.

He certainly wouldn't know that Maximus displayed such demeanor because the young man, familiar with history from a previous life, firmly believed that during this period, no matter how great the difficulties, the rebel army led by Spartacus would achieve victory.

Quintus steadied himself, and cautioned in a deep voice, "The Roman army is stationed at Ascoli Port, which is not too far from us. If they march quickly along the coastal road, it will only take two days to reach us! So... leader, you should order the troops to stop advancing immediately, camp on the spot,

wait for the main force to catch up, ensure their safety first, and then discuss with the other leaders on how to break through the Roman army's encirclement."

Chapter 154: Blocked Ahead, Pursued from Behind_2

Maximus's face finally showed a trace of solemnity. He instructed Akegu to bring the map, examined the position of Ascoli Port carefully, and then said solemnly, "Quintus, you are right! Akegu, you must immediately head to the front and inform Fesaros and Torrelugo to halt their march and find a place to camp on site."

"Yes!"

"Hagux, you must immediately dispatch cavalry to inform Spartacus and the other leaders, telling them, 'There are Roman troops ahead blocking the way. We will remain here, at this—'"

"Mateninum," Quintus reminded him.

"Right, we will stay at Mateninum to await their decision. Furthermore, you must also send cavalry to inform Attutmus; he should have also detected the Roman troops ahead. Tell him I suggest he lead his troops to me as soon as possible."

"Understood." Hagux turned his horse around and galloped away.

Before long, he rushed back, and riding alongside him was none other than Okmar, the Great Captain of the rebel cavalry.

"Okmar, why are you here?!" Maximus was a bit surprised.

"Leader Maximus, I have important military news to report!" Okmar's expression was stern, and his gaze swept over Maximus and those around him.

Maximus took the hint and willingly stepped forward, walking with him to a nearby secluded spot.

"Cross is dead." Okmar spoke heavily, his tone grave.

Maximus paused for a moment and asked, "How did he die?"

Seeing that Maximus neither showed shock nor sorrow, Okmar thought of how he and Cross had always been at odds and sighed inwardly. He lowered his voice and said, "He led his troops into the mountain bends of Galgano in secret, intending to evade the Roman army and return south. However, he never expected the Romans to find him first and force a battle...

He led his troops in a fierce fight, but in the end, the Romans relied on their numerical superiority to defeat them. He died on the battlefield, and his entire force suffered heavy casualties. Only a small number escaped the Roman pursuit, heading north and eventually regrouping with us."

"Cross stubbornly ignored our advice and insisted on leading his troops to remain in the south. Dying alone is one thing, but dragging so many brothers down with him? What a fool!" Maximus's expression turned dark as he cursed harshly. Although Cross's downfall was not unexpected, thinking about the soldiers who died alongside him left him feeling a twinge of discomfort.

Despite being Cross's compatriot and having had a good relationship with him in the past, Okmar found himself somewhat agreeing with Maximus's words. After a moment of silence, he said, "After Cross's soldiers joined our ranks, this news spread quickly, causing unrest within our troops. Several leaders are busy placating the soldiers. Therefore, Leader Spartacus has instructed me to inform you that this news should be temporarily kept confidential to maintain stability within the ranks."

Maximus nodded. "Understood."

"Furthermore—" Okmar hesitated before continuing, "We have noticed over the past couple of days that the Roman army following us is accelerating their march. Based on calculations by several leaders, if we continue at our current pace, the Roman army will likely catch up with us in three or four days. Therefore, Leader Spartacus suggests all units speed up their march...

But just now, Hagux informed me that several tens of thousands of Roman troops are blocking the way ahead, and you have already decided to halt the march and camp on site, waiting to regroup with us... I will hurry back immediately to report your decision to Spartacus and see what the leaders decide after their discussions."

"Roman forces are blocking us in the front, Roman troops are pursuing us from the rear, and now we've suffered consecutive defeats. The situation is extremely dire!" Maximus spoke with a tone that was both a lament and a reminder.

"I understand. I will urge Spartacus and the other leaders to make their decision quickly, and then I'll return to inform you." Okmar responded solemnly.

He climbed onto his horse, preparing to leave, but suddenly turned his head back and said gravely, "Maximus, over the past year, Enomai, Cross, and many of the brothers who came out of the Gladiator School with us have fallen in battle. You must stay vigilant!"

"You take care too." Maximus froze for a moment before responding casually.

To be honest, having been reborn into this era, perhaps due to his previous life as a homebody, Maximus felt emotionally detached. Apart from having some respect for the historical hero Spartacus and some feelings for Hamilcar, who cared for him, Maximus only regarded the gladiators he'd spent years with as mere acquaintances. But now, Okmar's words stirred some emotions within him as he watched Okmar riding away and felt a melancholic longing...

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When Maximus issued the order to set up camp, it was still midday, the sun high in the sky, and the weather scorching.

Fortunately, the terrain around Atenum was flat, with a nearby river, so there was no need to exert extra effort searching for a more suitable campsite.

The Womans River carried silt, flowing year-round from west to east through the Apennine Mountains, carving out a narrow riverside plain along the southern edge of Pisenum. Maximus's army settled at the easternmost and widest stretch of this plain, capable of accommodating more than twenty thousand troops.

The previously long and winding marching formation began to orderly leave the main road and move into the pre-selected campsite.

Casaridaoa was among the troops. When he initially led his companions in an attempt to join the rebel army, the Great Captain patrolling Sarabia City, Bubius, hesitated to make a decision and sought permission from Legion Commander Fesaros.

Fesaros, seeing that they were robust and looked fit for soldiers, immediately wanted to agree. However, this led to a dispute with Military Judge Sidonius. Ultimately, they compromised, assigning them as reserve soldiers to six separate units under close observation by team officers. Only with consistent good performance would they become official rebel soldiers (in truth, the Military Judge suspected them of being spies and wanted to ensure they were closely monitored within the army).

Long marches under the scorching sun, coupled with the weight of bags exceeding tens of kilograms, left Casaridaoa drenched in sweat. When he glimpsed the sparkling waters of the river not far away, he felt the urge to jump in and swim. Yet he restrained himself, having learned a lesson on his first day marching, when similar actions led to punishment from the team officer and almost got him expelled from the unit. Since then, he became much more obedient.

Casaridaoa belonged to the Centurion that once patrolled Sarabia City. Following everyone to the assembly point, the Great Captain Bubius issued the task of building the camp, and Centurion Stags led their unit to their designated area.

Without waiting for orders, everyone set down their bags, retrieved their digging tools, and began working. After all, aside from marching, building camps had become second nature to them.

"Usually, we don't start camping until dusk. Why are we doing it so early today?"

"I don't know. How would I? You should ask the team captain."

"I doubt the team captain knows either. He's with us here. During the assembly earlier, I saw him try several times to ask the Great Captain questions, but due to discipline, he ultimately held back."

"The reason for early camping is simple enough. Surely the leader got news of Roman troops blocking the way ahead and ordered the halt. Otherwise, we've been constantly pushed to march faster since the start, never given early rest like today."

Chapter 155: The Surprise Attack of the Roman Army

"What you said makes sense, but if that's the case, then we're in trouble! We've been pursued by the Roman Army this whole time. If there are Roman forces ahead blocking us, then... we'll be surrounded!"

"We've been chased by the Roman Army every day like dogs, walking nonstop. We're exhausted. If it were as you said, it'd actually be great—we could confront the Romans head-on. I'd love to chop off a few Roman heads to make all my training worthwhile."

"You're all talk. During combat training, you were constantly scolded by the captain for your poor performance. The Roman Army's soldiers aren't to be trifled with. If you really faced them, even with a shield, you might not be able to block their sword thrusts."

"Him? He joined late and hasn't been on the battlefield yet. Forget fighting Romans—if he doesn't wet himself just standing there, it'd already be a win."

"Y-you don't underestimate me..."

"Hahaha..."

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Casaridaoa pricked up his ears, listening to the soldiers' teasing banter while tirelessly swinging his small iron hoe, clearing out the robust wheat shoots around him. Both sides of the Womans River were covered in wheat fields. The soldiers' first task was to clear an open area. Casaridaoa had already lost count of how many fields he'd destroyed along the march and no longer felt guilty about it.

Stags watched the soldiers joking and chatting nearby. As long as it didn't impact their work progress, he saw no need to intervene. On the contrary, he thought soldiers relieving their stress with some humor helped ease their fatigue and lift their spirits.

His attention, however, frequently landed on Casaridaoa. A slave from Little Asia, Stags held deep disdain for him due to his known history of exploiting other slaves. Despite Stags' protests, Great Captain Bubius had forced Casaridaoa into his Centurion unit. Stags could only hope this guy would make a grave mistake so he could kick him out. But, surprisingly, throughout the march, Casaridaoa had adhered strictly to military discipline and worked exceptionally hard—far beyond Stags' expectations.

After watching him work for a while, Stags walked over and nudged Casaridaoa with his foot. "Hey, using an iron hoe to pull weeds is too slow, and it ruins the smoothness of the ground. Try this instead." With that, he pulled out the short sword hanging from his waist and tossed it to Casaridaoa.

Casaridaoa caught the short sword, momentarily stunned. He looked tough, but in reality, he was quite clever. Otherwise, he wouldn't have survived years in Sarabia City dodging the slave masters' wrath.

After joining the rebel army, he was issued supplies and some personal items but not a weapon. While it was true that weapons were scarce in the rebellion, the complete lack of even a wooden weapon for him revealed what the team officers thought of him. Casaridaoa kept these feelings bottled up, vowing to prove himself through his actions.

"After cutting the wheat grass, give that short sword a good sharpening before returning it," Stags reminded him.

"Yes, Captain!" Casaridaoa shouted, his voice filled with excitement.

Over 16,000 soldiers rotated shifts to finally dig trenches and build earthworks.

The exhausted soldiers collapsed onto the ground. Most of their conversations revolved around whether the Supply Camp had enough time to prepare food today and what delicious things might be waiting for them.

Stags approached and said, "I've got good news for you. The leader has permitted each team to take turns bathing in the river—"

"That's great!" The soldiers burst into cheers.

"Additionally, the Supply Camp has requested that those of you who are good swimmers catch some fish in the river. They'll make fish soup and pan-fried fish to add something tastier to our meals."

"That's no problem at all!" Many soldiers, especially those with a fishing or sailing background, perked up at the suggestion.

The gently flowing Womans River shimmered under the sea breeze, its surface rippling with silvery waves. Both banks, dense with heavy green wheat, swayed like an emerald ocean. Flocks of herons foraging on the riverbanks were startled and scattered into flight as the soldiers stormed forward.

The men quickly stripped off their clothes and jumped into the river, their rowdy splashes and laughter echoing across the water.

Maximus watched this scene unfold, feeling a fleeting urge to join them in the water. But he quickly suppressed the thought. As the leader of the group, he had to maintain his authority and remain vigilant at all times, ready to give orders, especially under such precarious circumstances.

"The rest of you, go and wash up as well," Maximus said to his attendants.

Receiving his permission, Akegu and some younger men cheered and ran to the river, but Casius, Valles, and a few others stayed behind.

"We can't all leave. What if you need something, and no one's here? We'll wait until Akegu and the others return before we go," Casius explained.

Casius' response earned Maximus' silent approval, though he showed no outward reaction. He merely instructed Casius to send someone to fetch water from the river, so he could wash his face and wipe himself clean.

Just then, Acronis and Karina walked over side by side. "Leader, we in the Female Camp would also like to bathe in the river. After marching for so many days, everyone's gotten filthy, especially the women who are on their cycles..."

The Female Camp had performed admirably during the march, not slowing the group down. Naturally, Maximus wasn't going to reject their simple request. After a moment's thought, he replied, "Bathing is fine, but this section of the river is already overrun by the men."

"We'll go upstream, where it's quieter," Karina had already thought it through.